Ukrainian Erotic Photography

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The post-Soviet changes in the outlook and thinking of artists and photographers, namely, their emancipation from the official culture and the state-sanctioned repression of sexuality as one of the leading mechanisms of control in the USSR, meant that photography of the 1990s differed drastically from that of the 1970s. The changes were tied to the changing mentality of post-Soviet citizens, which informed visual perception, and to the abolition of taboos that brought new experiments with physicality and sexuality into photography, often shocking or disorienting the viewers. Photography no longer engaged with social contexts: it was too busy searching for the new dominant image, reveling in new pleasures, and doing away with aesthetic tenets of the so-called "system" altogether. The history of Ukrainian erotic photography challenges value judgments, largely because it skipped several formative stages of world photography. For a long time, it functioned within the fold of Soviet culture, and thus could be analyzed in connection with the basic beliefs, aesthetics, poetics and tropes that were instilled in it during the Soviet era. The 1990s, however, had "toppled" Ukrainian photography into a new dimension altogether. For this reason, the years of independence can be read as the most interesting and often unpredictable period in the history of Ukrainian photography.

The era that saw the end of the great Soviet tradition was marked by all the conflicts and ambiguities inherent in transitions from one cultural model to the other. Crucially, Ukrainian art was finally emancipated from the system that sought to orchestrate the country's cultural processes. A deluge of information about new and previously unknown trends in world art, as well as opportunities for short trips to the West, meant that by the early 1990s the experience of Western art was actively informing the Soviet mentality.

Ukrainian photography became body-centric in the 1990s. Obviously, this development was belated compared to trends in western or even eastern European countries. Despite that, Ukrainian photographers developed a recognizable approach to bodies: their context differed from western experience, and so did the postmodern aesthetic that emerged out of Soviet material. Eroticization was not only the first sign of absolute freedom in Ukrainian photography, but also a singular banner of inner protest.

Obviously, one should not forget that the Kharkiv-based Vremia [Time] group introduced the so-called "body line" to the Soviet underground in the early 1970s. For the daring and radical group, representations of naked bodies were an instrument for blurring the line between the public and the private, but their gestures were interpreted as provocations during their time. This occurred primarily because all photographs of the Vremia group had clear political subtext, no matter what visual tropes they might have employed, and those ranged from explicit physiological imagery to "surreal sexual hallucinations." One should remember, however, that Kharkiv-based photographers worked in a peculiar cultural and intellectual milieu, which produced markedly politicized photographs in a gesture altogether uncharacteristic of western postmodernism.

The experiments (for almost all these experiences can be described as experimental) of Ukrainian artists who worked in erotic photography or treated erotic themes and physicality in the 1990s departed from the trite image of the "standard Soviet body," which could be markedly faceless, athletic, energetic, sometimes even blatantly plebeian and ugly, but never erotic. Soviet bodies were as standardized as any Soviet standard project, and even if they were depicted in painting, cinema or photography, it was done in a way that would preclude sexual desire. Erotic desire was no longer repressed in the 1990s; therefore, photography could aestheticize desire and elevate bodies to the level of a new reflexive category.

According to some critics, the male element became the dominant image in Ukrainian art of the 1990s, and oft-repeated phallic imagery came to symbolize total emancipation. In photography, however, female bodies were represented more broadly, and sexual freedom divorced from radical amorality became the leading theme. Erotic photography of the 1990s was affective and highly subjective, often demonstrating an excess of feeling, and its symbolism was often more important than semantics.

Mykola Trokh belonged to a large and important phenomenon in Ukrainian art of the 1990s, namely, the Ukrainian New Wave. He was fascinated with altered states of con-

sciousness, markedly deformed perspectives and naturalism, which always carried an element of eroticism. For Trokh, these facets of human life were particularly lyrical. Many of his photographs documented the life of the renowned Paris Commune art squat. The explicit "Dionysian" element of these works was openly quotidian in nature. The art scene of the 1990s flourished on the ruins of the Soviet Union, morally and physically emancipated from its taboos. Experiments with bodily themes eventually became a prominent trend in Mykola Trokh's works. The symbolism of nakedness occupied a central place in his works, and the experience of the act verged on pornography. For Trokh, bodies were objects of various manipulations, which highlighted not their beauty and grace (to the contrary, he often shone light on ugliness), but rather their highly personal, encoded semantic dimension.

Roman Piatkovka, who worked in Kharkiv in the 1990s, produced the Games of Libido (1991) and Wrong Pictures (1997) series that were highly typical of the time. Eroticism, stripping and the models' interactions turned into an endless carnivalesque play.

In the early 1990s, Hlib Vysheslavskyi created one of the few series where bodies gain autonomy to the point of marginalizing everything else. The series does not engage with symbols or contexts. It is subjective to the point of verging on amateur photography, poignant rather than technically sophisticated. Details do not turn these bodies into anthropologic documents: these are personal representations, admiration unencumbered with any additional meanings.

The visually oriented culture of the 2000s produced even more startling interpretations of naked bodies. Adopting the visual output of the abovementioned Ukrainian New Wave as their platform, the subsequent generation of artists mostly engaged in involved documentation of their private lives, expansion of the boundaries of their sexuality, active self-representation, and occasionally expressions of national identity through representing bodies. Photography of the Noughties was a product of the digital era that posed different questions and challenges; it highlighted the collision of the feminine and the masculine, broadcasting various meanings, from conscious denial of the artists' sexuality or wide-ranging experiments with the motif of desire to bodies that dictate pleasure. Erotic photography of the 2000s adopted all forms of sexual activities as a game. This generation had no experience of the era rife with repression and taboos, and was certain that desire and pleasure were not only possible, but even necessary. That said, erotic photography of the 2000s generation is characteristically polarized. The first pole represents perfect digital bodies relying on clichéd imagery stemming from popular culture, with its "polished" stereotypical perspective; the second treats real bodies, not necessarily perfect and sometimes outright ugly, but also authentic and markedly natural. In the first case, naked bodies are defined by their externalities, and this trend is compromised by its connection to the ideology of popular culture, where all meanings are pre-programmed; in the second case, a naked body remains a site of private experience or fodder for random experiments. Following the former trend of "idealized eroticism," Sergii Mikhalkiv adopted the language of paintings, creating meticulous "imitations of the great masters," where nakedness is an ideal form, and its existence in any given environment is just a vibrant, perfect ersatz.



Sergii Mikhalkiv,
Portrait of my Wife, 2013

Photographers who represent naked bodies to convey their private experience approach physicality in a markedly different manner. Anna Shashuk's photographs deal with personal experiences: each picture ostensibly documents her own conquests, and naked male bodies are treated with overt admiration.

Oleksandr Kyiashchenko resorted to a diary method for his Two Rooms story, a series about a lonely gay man photographed in his day-to-day life, sometimes alone, sometimes with casual partners. The unabridged version of the story features extremely explicit confessions about the protagonist's sexual life. Depressing erotic photography by Bohdan Huliai explores his provincial microcosm with its set of conventional characters. His works prioritize formal play; occasionally they are highly provocative, albeit with a markedly personal subtext.



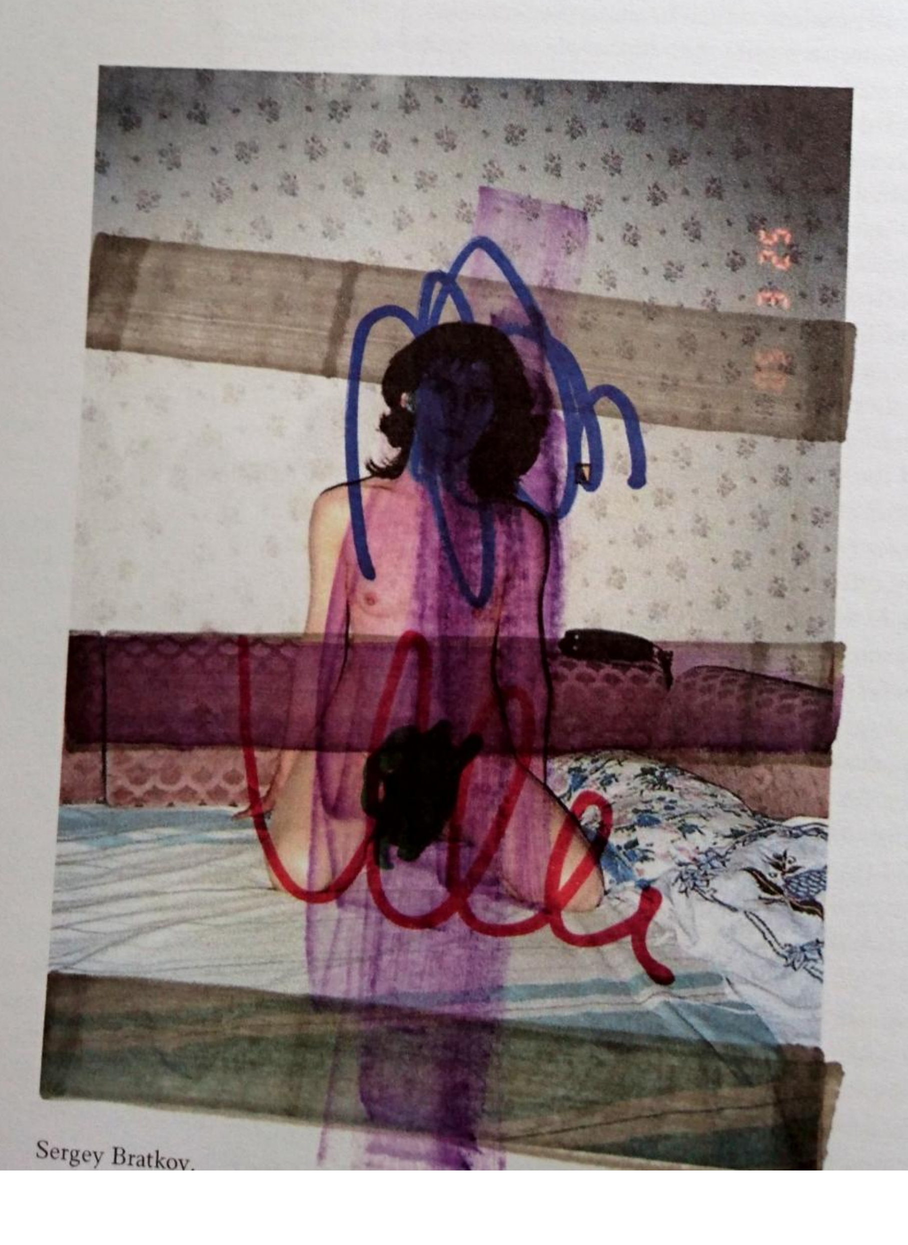
Anastasia Lazurenko,
Untitled, from the series
Pearly Gates, 2010—2016

Oleksandr Pankovets and Anastasia Lazurenko engage with the notions of candidness and outright obscenity. Oleksandr Pankovets's works straddle the line between private erotic pictures and conceptual experiments, whereas Anastasia Lazurenko created a series of Polaroid shots of young women in very private moments. Additionally, Lazurenko experimented with selfies, putting herself on the same footing as her models and relinquishing the subjectivity of a voyeur in favor of the subjectivity of a participant of the game. These artists care little about coming up with conceptual ideas or elaborate backgrounds for their series. Their photos are spontaneous, unpremeditated and unstudied, befitting the sensibility of the young generation which values not crude raw physicality but rather sexuality as a feeling. This photography is evocative of what Roland Barthes wrote in his essay about this very same obscenity of love: "What does the aesthetic of the image matter? Something accommodates itself exactly to my desire; I shall therefore make no concessions to style."

Marina Poliakova's project might be the only example of what could be described as a socially conscious exploration of gender roles. Naked men frolicking outside depart from the conventional iconography of the masculine. Marina Poliakova addressed several

questions, most prominently the renewed opposition between the masculine and the feminine, feminine traits in men, and changing roles or behavioral models. The Plastic Mythology series by Yaroslav Solop alludes to Greek myths, but images of gods and heroes are paired with symbols from popular culture, bringing playfulness and irony into the conversation. Solop's layered photographs open several directions of interpretation, where ostensibly erotic images function in conjunction with proliferating markers of the ideology of consumerist society.

In the present edition, we want to showcase all directions in Ukrainian erotic photography while limiting our chronology to the independence era. The goals for representing bodies in the 1990s and the 2000s differed; each generation treated bodies in its own way. Ukrainian erotic photography can convey protest or subjective reflections; it can be experimental or document random spontaneous experiences; it mostly avoids gender issues and approaches queer culture only haltingly. The search for a Ukrainian body continues, because earlier history of Ukrainian erotic art remains obscure and little studied, and the present situation opens even more possible directions.



Sergey Bratkov.